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AUTHOR Hensley, Robin
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ABSTRACT

A first-year first grade teacher's professional disappointments were broken down into three divisions: (1) power and control, or the lack of them; (2) co-worker socialization; and (3) lack of professionalism and support. Lack of control was reflected in pressure from administrators to use certain texts, or even to decorate classrooms in a certain way. Through the socialization of new teachers, veterans aimed at changing anything in the beginning teachers' methods that was new, instead of learning about it or looking to see if it worked. A lack of professionalism was demonstrated by the apparently inattentive evaluations by administrators and by their unwillingness to allow teachers to exercise subject text choice. Furthermore, compromises over such interpersonal factors as the need to be accepted and the desire to be liked created stress for the new instructors. Disappointment arose as well from state-mandated curricular reforms that only made the situation worse. (SG)

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Presentation to

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"Instructional Choices in Language Arts: Reality or Illusion"

Presented by

ROBIN HENSLEY
Texas Woman's University
2102 Northwood Terrace
Denton, Texas 76201

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Well my first year of teaching is over. First grade was just the challenge I was looking for and the rewards were many. I was working with both veteran teachers with experience that I longed to learn from and new teachers with creativity and enthusiasm. This created, or should have created, a melting pot of stimulus for teaching. I was brought out into reality rather quickly when my principal decided to show it to me the second week of school. He called me into his office and immediately I panicked. I went through my last week's schedule, and things I had done that week, trying to figure out where I made a mistake. I'm sure you've had the same experience, the panic that strikes you that first time your principal calls you into "his office". I kind of felt like I was the student again instead of the teacher. You know kind of a de`ja` vu. Anyway, I went to his office and there was a student in his office and they were talking. Well, I didn't know the student so I was a little bewildered. My principal went on about rattlesnake hunting and how he ties himself to a tree overnight so that his scent is not detectable to the snakes. Now by this time I was thinking, so what? big deal? what do I care about hunting? After finishing his story the principal got out his paddle and gave the boy some swats. I was shocked!

Some of you may chuckle, but I thought he was just being friendly, I had no idea I was being used as a witness. I guess the whole reason I wanted to relay that episode to you is because that was the beginning of my realization that teaching is not like the professors teach you, it's not like when you student

teach or substitute teach. In those supervised pre-teaching experiences you have only limited responsibility. As a witness to the swats, I discovered I was the teacher, responsible for my decisions, my students' performance, and to some degree how those students thought about school, for years to come. I became accountable as a teacher.

That episode also was a disappointment that I won't forget. The disappointments and dissatisfactions were many more than I had expected. However, these negative aspects did not dampen my enthusiasm to teach the best that I could because of my responsibilities to the students. The disappointments are realities of teaching. They come with confinements which created constant pressures. They come from barriers and disapproval.

The disappointments, or realities, if you prefer, came in many forms. I have narrowed them down to three divisions.

1. Power and control, or lack of power and control
2. Co-worker socialization
3. Lack of professionalism and support

Over the school year I kept a reflective journal of my teaching life.1 Upon analysis of those entries, I have concluded (along with the validating assistance of outside readers), instances or situations of conflict usually fell into those categories. My findings and generalizations may not be applicable to all schools nor all teachers, however at a time when our education system is in a constant state of criticism and re-evaluation, perhaps we

need to investigate what are the realities of our classrooms and not depend on policies and legislative criteria top define reality for us.

Specifically my investigation pertained to first graders and the language arts content area. As I mentioned I was a first year teacher, therefore my perspective was fresh and without any previous possible conditioning of the public school system other than what I remember from my own schooling and the university training I took as a Master's student in education. There is also the possibility of idealism, a shadow which lurks in my analysis.

All of my research data came from my reflective journal in which I made daily entries. My entries consisted of observations from situations with other teachers and situation that occurred to me with administration or parents. Because of the possibility of my idealism and the possibility that my findings were merely gossip and without educational merit, I had two outside, impartial readers add comments and criticisms to each entry in my journal. Without knowledge of their patterned analysis of my entries, I also reflexively analyzed what I had previously written. In general, I looked for meaning in events, and labeled entries for these interpretive categories. Then, I compared my interpretation with those written by the two outside readers.

One of the outside readers was a professional in the education field with experience in research and teaching. The other outside reader is in the field of child development and is a long time trusted friend whom I knew to be forthright and

honest. The actual research lasted approximately 7 months.

When I started my research I was studying my classroom's progress through use of child centered curriculum and without realizing it all my journal observations in relation to my use of child centered curriculum brought about the question of do teachers really have control of their classroom and their decision making? Is the education system that the state legislature mandates and school systems are implementing really functioning well at the classroom level?

Let me pose some questions to you as food for thought-

In Texas we are required to administer a standardized test called Texas Education of Minimum Skills or TEAMS in the 1st (excluded as of 1989-90 school year), 3rd, and 5th grades. The test assesses performance in mathematics, reading and writing. Also, as teachers we are evaluated from a set of guidelines anywhere from 1 to 4 times per year depending on our years of experience. In theory the evaluations may be appropriate but in reality, the teacher is expected to put on a show for the evaluator. Does the testing really improve our students' learning? Does assessment improve teaching? Does the test prescribe the skills that the students learn to master and score high? In addition to those influences, doe the evaluations with prescribed actions and reactions really make us better teachers or in reality do we prepare and teach for the evaluation in order to score well?

When as a new teacher fresh, out of school, I was introduced to this grade level, I was eventually concerned that my ideas

were not encouraged. Rather, there seemed to be a tendency to do things the "old way." I wondered if some teachers frown upon ingenuity and enthusiasm or new ideas because of the way it may make them look? Are they threatened at all by other teachers teaching a different way from them?

And a last question which guided much of my writing and reasoning was, why do teachers have to make such an effort to gain the respect that we deserve? We earn four year degrees like any other profession. Does the problem begin with society in general, policy makers in legislative sessions and school board meetings, or possibly with the attitudes of our immediate supervisors such as principals or superintendents? Or even more close to home, are we sabotaged by our own colleagues, and supervisors?

We all know teachers' classrooms usually reflect their attitudes, interests, emphasis and desires for the classroom environment. Yet the classroom appearance was one very basic area that I found teachers in my study had lost some of their control. In my journal I recorded the following observation;

> 'Other things that the teachers feel is unfair is the control over the classroom environment. Melvin (the principal) counts off on evals if he doesn't like a teachers' room. In our rooms there are no bulletin boards. You must decorate panels of the wall. They are white walls so some teachers simply border a space and decorate directly on the wall. He counts off for this. He prefers the walls to have colored butcher paper as a background. A teacher must decorate her room to his preference, or suffer punishment of a lower evaluation score.(9/19/88).'

A teacher's room, her trained opinion on how to best suit her

classrooms needs, yet someone else in authority decides what is best. Where is the teachers' input in this situation? Where does her control begin if not with the bulletin boards? Perhaps you have never experienced that much control in your school district so let me give you an example that perhaps you might relate to more vividly.

Borko and Niles (1972) wrote; "...the district in which participating teachers are employed places a very heavy emphasis on a basal reading program. Teachers are required to use specific basal texts and are held accountable for student progress through these texts. It is not surprising, therefore, that teachers participating in this study were found to have stronger content-centered conceptions of reading that student teachers" (p. 137). My beliefs in student centered curriculum were confronted directly and with disappointing results when my class began using basal readers. I recorded the following:

> 'It was the first day in our new basals and we discussed the pictures. The first reading group read the first story and I could see that looking through the book, exploring the new pictures had taken more time than I had. I asked the students in the top group to read the story silently at their desk, and then later we discussed it. They were much less motivated, and the lesson even lost something for me. I never wanted to be a teacher that went by the basal content and lesson plans so stringently. I want my lessons to flow from the cues I get from the students (1/12/89).'

This incident directly correlates to a study done by Duffy, Roehler and Putnam in 1987. They found that "When district school administrators establish procedures to insure coverage of these materials (referring to basal readers and workbooks), teachers are left with little time for anything else" (p.358).

Also in 1983, Duffy and Ball made the statement that "The data suggest that teachers do not rely upon rational models to make decisions about developing student understanding but, instead, focus on procedural concerns regarding classroom organization and management" (p.173). Certainly the teacher is not in control of how ar what she teaches in the classroom. In my situation the results were very disappointing, not only to me and my sense of value as a teacher, but also to my students who anticipated a fun learning experience. The constraints in this situation are not unique. I've heard other teachers discussing how frustrating teaching can be when our control is lost and or administrators interfere with our teaching methods.

The second category I wanted to talk about is co-worker socialization. I began my teaching year with a great deal of excitement and anticipation. My ideas were not acknowledged positively or negatively from the administration, but because of the evaluation forms, and suggestions from other teachers I conformed to what was expected, both consciously and unconsciously. Take for example this entry:

> 'For the evaluations I changed my format, quite a bit. The first couple of months I had language arts lessons such as writing and illustrating individual stories as well as, whole class stories, letters to grand-parents, and covering the text material. We compared stories and read lots of books silently as well as to each other in groups of 2, just from the pictures. In grade level meetings and our random conversations both I and another new teacher were told ways to do well on the evaluations that were coming up emphasizing things the evaluators looked for. They suggested for me to go by the teachers manual more, as opposed to my creative lessons. The manual had lessons broken down into days of

the week with activities that taught a skill. These activities are good for putting on a show. (12-8-88)'

In this situation I changed my child centered activities and the informal atmosphere for a prescribed, teacher controlled basal lesson. I felt the more experienced teachers would know how to score higher on the evaluation and since the evaluations are considered our actual ability, I felt it important to score high even if it meant sacrificing my standards for a day. However, a day turned into a week, and a week turned into a few weeks. Before I knew it I had waited two months for my evaluation, teaching from the basal just in case I had an evaluation that day.

At this point I have to say that we as teachers socialize a newcomer, knowingly or unknowingly. With our suggestions, advice, and habits, we aim to change anything that might be new, instead of learning about it. We seldom look to see if it works in order to implement that new idea. We are creatures of habit and comfort. You see when I began teaching I was strongly encouraged to use a system called Workshop Way. Three of the five first grade teachers used this system for all content areas. I wanted to have more interaction with my students than I felt that particular system provided. Therefore, I declined gracefully everytime the subject came up. However, the others continuously let me know when the workshops were for this system and I felt that I was expected to implement it the next year. I did end up using parts of the system that I felt were a benefit to my students and added to their classroom learning. The point

is, I was being pressured to perform the way they felt I should, to their expectations, and to their way of doing things without regard to my opinions or goals. Socialization happens whether knowingly or unknowingly, whether it is we who are doing it, or we that are accepting it. Some socialization helps to erode that melting pot of enthusiasm, ideas, and creativity that a group or grade level should have and use to their advantage.

The last point I want to talk about is lack of professionalism and support in our school system. When I began my research I never thought about this topic having a role in our decision making as teachers. But through the course of events I witnessed how a lack of professionalism and support not only effected my decisions as a teacher but also my performance and general attitude.

When I speak of the term professionalism I am thinking of qualities such as integrity, respectability, loyalty and fairness with regard to one's work. As a first year teacher, I took it for granted that both administration and peers would act as professionals, especially in today's education system. A system in which I believe we are expending a great deal of effort to be thought of and treated as professionals. However, I found that a lack of professionalism not only added pressure to my decision making, but also to the atmosphere of the workplace. I recorded one incident that happened, I hope it is not typical, but I believe it illustrates how the best of intentions within our legislature do not actually become a reality within the classroom.

> 'During my evaluation, I believe my principal also did a fellow teachers evaluation. He sat between both classes at the doorway. After my evaluation he told that fellow teacher that her lesson sounded good. How would he have known what she was doing if he was giving me his full attention, enabling him to evaluate me fairly? In addition, during this time he cleaned his fingernails and took his shoes off to fix his socks, sat sideways to me looking straight ahead for periods of time. Did I have his full attention? Was this a fair evaluation? What's surprising is that I received several EQ's (exceptional quality) and did quite well! (12-14-88)

My job performance is suppose to be exemplified by my evaluation scores. Yet my superior cannot give me his full attention, even though it is a part of his job description. This kind of behavior shows me an attitude of apathy and laziness. He is not conducting himself in a professional manner, a manner that I should respect, or from which I might gain respect for myself. If my superior acts in such a way, perhaps I should not bother acting like an educator or professional. If the principal can be so apathetic and disrespectful to my job how can we expect the parents or students to respect our profession? How can we continue making the decision to improve our efforts to teach the students?

Throughout my observations and research the topic of the TEAMS test, basal readers, and evaluations came up again, and again. Therefore we must conclude that they influence the teaching of language arts. The use of basals and testing to monitor learning exemplifies the foal of teaching skills. In the actual classroom, what are the opportunities for the teacher to teach language arts in a way she feels is effective? I was

required to teach language arts from the basal and its supplement. I did however, reserve 20 minuter per day to introduce methods of learning that I felt encouraged and motivated the students learning abilities. Shannon has confirmed my feelings of no control within my classroom when he stated "Not only do teachers lose control over the methods and goals, they also forfeit subjectivity within their teaching knowledge about scientific investigations of reading and instruction, the respect due professionals authority over classroom activities, and the history of teaching reading" (1989).

While I was preparing to become a teacher I had thought hundreds of times about my class. When I envisioned being a teacher, I had often considered what I wanted for my students. I made promises to myself about what I would and would not do. I worried about many things and made myself, promises that now I find myself breaking. The most important realization is that I am teaching for the test. Teaching to the TEAMS tests is like the umbrella of my curriculum with everything else under it.

I had fears when I began teaching, relating to the reality of not having my contract renewed, and the fear of measuring up as a "good" teacher on our evaluation system. Because it was my first year teaching I gave in and sold out for tear of not being accepted, for being seem as an outcast and for fear of being labeled uncooperative. I played the game, but at who's expense? For seven hours everyday the students in my room paid some of that cost. But, I paid heavily as well, as I continually felt guilty and I second guessed all my decisions. Actually, we all

paid.

In conclusion there are interpersonal factors that stand out and that affect teachers' decision making processes. First, I believe that there are four premises that are essential in daily lives and therefore affect our decision making. These four premises are:

(1) As human beings we have a need to be accepted by others,
(2) At some level we even want others to like us,
(3) We want or need less stress in our lives, and
(4) We want to increase our happiness.

Sometimes, to attain a balance in these four premises, we do what others want us to do. We may give into their ways and in so doing compromise our own personal standards and beliefs. This is not to say that our own standards and beliefs are better than others' in any absolute sense. But, they are just right for ourselves for our own conscience. These compromises, even when unrecognized, create more stress, which results in disappointment in ourselves, having a bad conscience, and feelings of shame. For example, my feelings manifested themselves in nightmares several times a week about the students, my principal, and other teachers. By giving into what others want, we create new fears and new stress. It becomes a vicious cycle which feeds on itself, and as it grows it spreads to where it can take over the school experience of one , teacher, and by extension, the school context.

A second issue concerns personal and practical responses to state mandated curricular reforms. The state passes education reform laws thinking they will help, but in reality the reforms

only make the situation worse. What looks good on paper is not necessarily going to work in the reality of schools and classrooms. The state passes laws without getting information or input from the teachers who are in the classroom. It is like going to a custodian to help with brain surgery. Melvin is doing the surgery with the criterion of how things look to the public. You can rip the whole brain out as long as the stitches don't show. This may seem harsh and one sided. Certainly my data is one sided. However, it is not harsh. I am being overly fair. We are the brain surgeons and we are unable to excise the lesions that structure our daily work.

It is possible that the state does know how to structure education and the problems lie in the area of communication between state agencies and local school hierarchies. It's really a philosophical question for teachers at Disney Elementary because our teaching days are a function of Melvin's views of the state's intention. We have no way to reach into the honey pot that may be at the state level.

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